



Interview with Allan Bloom

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“Too Much Tolerance”

Allan Bloom is author of the controversial best-selling book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, and co-director of the University of Chicago's Olin Center for Inquiry Into the Theory and Practice of Democracy.

For most of his career, Professor Bloom has labored in academe, translating and interpreting Plato and Rousseau. The Closing of the American Mind, which argues that the American education today is "cultural relativism," launched Bloom into the national spotlight. A storm of controversy has enveloped his related criticism of the new morality of the post-60s America, feminism, and rock n' roll.

NPQ: The theme of your best-selling book is that the American mind, exemplified by today's students, is closed to questioning because it is so indiscriminately open.

What do you mean by this?

Bloom: The center of my argument is the following: a new kind of thought, cultural relativism, has taken the place of liberal thought, which was at the root of democratic freedom. Liberal thought insisted on the self-evidence of men being created free and equal, and endowed with certain inalienable rights.

In the name of greater freedom, cultural relativism denies there are certain principles that remain constant. Paradoxically, that leads to the destruction of freedom because there are no permanent standards of judgment. Everything depends on the specific historical circumstances and there is no reference point for change.

From the beginnings of liberal thought, there was a tendency toward the idea of freedom without limits and an open-minded tolerance without discrimination. To avert civil strife, Hobbes, Locke and the American founders saw the necessity of attenuating absolute religious beliefs by assigning them to the realm of opinion, instead of knowledge. But they always insisted that the self-evident principles of society were indubitable.

Now, it seems that in liberal societies transformed by cultural, or "value relativism" – which can be traced to the pervasive influence of German philosophy, in particular Nietzsche and Heidegger – full freedom can be attained only when there is no knowledge at all about nature and the good society. There are only opinions or preferences, each as good as the next, each equally tolerated.

NPQ: How does this transformation in the realm of ideas translate into practical life?

Bloom: Today, openness is heralded as the great insight of our times. An education of openness does not demand any fundamental agreement. It is merely open to all kinds of men, lifestyles and ideologies. Indiscriminateness has become a moral imperative. There is no enemy today other than the man who is not open to everything, who accepts everything.

By confusing relativism and tolerance, liberal societies morally disarm themselves. For example, when Khomeini first came to power in Iran, we were terribly disarmed in condemning him because we stood by the principle that each culture has its own way. In our open-mindedness, we denied that human rights, grounded on reason, were morally superior to the perhaps fanatic dispositions of "particular culture."

The insatiable appetite to live as one pleases, to construct life-styles – as opposed to the search for the good life – thrives on the indiscriminate openness of advanced value relativism. In the extreme, freedom becomes the only absolute and any limit is seen as arbitrary and tyrannical, even the limit that would preserve freedom. Freedom itself thus becomes relativized.

NPQ: If reason no longer guides society, what has taken its place?

Bloom: Today, irrational, subjective preferences posited as "values" are what guide us. In both philosophy and practical life, reason has no more standing.

You can talk to kids today about the appeal of rock n' roll and they say, "It really goes right to my heart, it goes to my core." When asked what that core is, they say "feelings," unaware that they have digested a modern philosophic argument about the superficiality of reason. That's why I say in my book that the images projected on Plato's cave these days are MTV videos.

NPQ: What is the result of the discrediting of reason?

Bloom: When relativism is discredited, all beliefs begin to have an attenuated character.

Indiscriminate tolerance of life-style preference and openness to everything can hardly be the basis for a shared vision of the public good. How is the social contract any longer possible under such conditions?

This problem is more serious for the United States than other polities because we were founded on the rule of reason and a version of natural rights, as embodied in the Constitution. The respect for reason, and its rule over the vulgar expression of passions and mere pursuit of self-interest, is the real standard which allows us to tolerate differences without saying what the final absolutes are. Unlike any other society, the possibility of philosophy is a necessity for America because it is the only polity founded on and by philosophy. That's why fanaticism of any kind is more harmful to us than any other community. Without reason, the way is opened for passionate fanaticism of one kind or another to assert itself in the vacuum.

In my view, the movements of the late 60s brought the new philosophy of cultural relativism to power and led to the easy acceptance of "lifestyle choices" justified by personal "liberation." The Enlightenment – the teaching that there are rational grounds for consensus based on our natural recognition of rights – came close to breathing its last breath in those days. Today, as a result, we have much less protection, both institutionally and in terms of our beliefs, against a more serious reaction from the intolerant right.

NPQ: Are you then proposing establishing a hierarchy of values to guide individual judgment in this ultra-plural American culture?

Bloom: No, not at all. But I am calling into question the clichés that make that "culture" seem unproblematic. We recognize the problems when we talk so much about roots. We want both rootedness and universalism, so we live in contradiction with ourselves.

We take it for granted in our time that the best person has the greatest variety of experiences, but we are also attracted to Heidegger who criticized us moderns for

developing "a tourist mentality" in life. This is a real difficulty, and we have vacillated between one pole and the other.

What I think is most critical now is more openness to the possibility of reason and more closedness to all thought which simply prefers the kind of irrationalism that became dominant in the intense and corrosive philosophic period we've just been through. Psychoanalysis, which emphasized the unconscious; existentialism, with its situational ethics and moral relativism; and historicism, with its rejection of nature, all need reexamination.

There must be an attempt to reconstruct an intellectual world that used to be open to rational analysis and judgment, thus narrowing the limitless horizon.

NPQ: Value relativism is another name for nihilistic indifference. Are you describing a contemporary nihilism among American youth?

Bloom: When I began writing *The Closing of the American Mind*, I thought of Nietzsche's nihilistic Last Man whose life has resemblance to the life of kids today. Their unlimited horizon is the hallmark of our age. Unconstrained in any choice, their future is open-ended. They have no possibility of setting goals or projecting ideals. They are like men in the state of nature – unconnected, isolated, with no inherited or unconditional connection with anything or anyone. They can be anything they want, but they have no particular reason to be anything.

By the time I finished writing, I realized that Plato's description in the *Republic* of the "democratic youth" of his time more accurately described kids today. He wrote about how they live day by day, gratifying any desire that occurs to them, saying whatever chances to pop into their minds, existing with "neither order nor necessity in life," and calling it "sweet, free, and blessed."

NPQ: The philosopher Leo Strauss, who was your mentor, worried about the practical consequences of nihilism. He felt it led inescapably to "fanatic obscurantism" – the opposition to human progress and enlightenment.

Bloom: I think Strauss was thinking of Heidegger when he wrote that. Heidegger focused so much on "rootedness" that it ultimately led him to take up the Nazi cause. Strauss felt that Heidegger's politics were no accident, but deeply related to his thought.

In the 50s, Strauss believed that America was in the grips of exactly the same kind of thinking that gripped Germany in the 1930s, partly because of the influence of Nietzsche and Heidegger in the universities here. He had lived through the consequences of value relativistic thinking and the demise of reason in Germany. He feared what it would mean for America.

NPQ: So, the debasing of reason yields to the tyranny of tolerance. Extreme tolerance of the irrational opens the way for intolerance toward reason.

Bloom: I do have a sense that authoritarianism is possible. Hitler was the central experience of my childhood. That such a thing as fascism could happen when the traditional moorings of German culture were shaken was shocking. The cultural dislocation in America today is not so dissimilar.

NPQ: When Strauss expressed his fears about extreme tolerance and unlimited choice leading to intolerance in the book *Natural Right and History*, published in 1953, it made little splash. Why has your book, over 30 years later, found such resonance?

Bloom: America has gone through a 30 year period of loving German philosophy by way of social science and Sartrean existentialism. I think people are sick and tired of always talking about choice, commitment and self-expression. All that is empty now.

NPQ: Could it be that in the wake of the cultural upheavals of the 60s, which deeply challenged social authority and convention, there is a yearning for the re-establishment of first principles and "the right way?"

Philosophy in the West was born, after all, when Cephalus left the house to make offerings to the sacred. Because of his absence, the link to founding origins was severed and the basis of authority came into doubt for the first time. Only then could philosophy emerge and the discovery of natural law through discourse made possible.

Bloom: I think that's an important reason for the appeal of my argument for reading the classic texts and returning to the origins of the principles of our society. If we have lost the grounds of our liberation from Cephalus' domination, we have to recover them.

Your question also suggests the reason why I've been called reactionary. It's assumed that when I criticize the cultural relativism that arose in the 60s as a dogmatism, I do it in the name of absolutes and tradition. But I'm not arguing for a return to anything. I'm not for the sacred or absolute values.

What I'm arguing for is the possibility of philosophy and against "value language." I'm arguing that if students know beforehand that all values are subjective, and thus chosen according to mere preference, then education cannot be connected with values.

My position could never be regarded as reactionary unless to think is reactionary - which it obviously is in certain schools where "value commitment" comes first.

That there are problematic moral consequences of liberalism nobody can doubt. The issue is the fate of thinking under extreme liberalism, because liberalism itself was salubrious for free enquiry.

The 60s, Feminism and Rock n' Roll

NPQ: Let's take a look at what you say about the student movement of the 60s, rock n' roll and feminism. First, the student movement. Far from believing they were the purveyors of relativism, participants of the student movement in the 60s thought they were rebelling against the moral indifference of a materialistic, selfish, suburban complacency that ignored racial injustice and the immoral war in Vietnam.

Bloom: I had a certain sympathy for the some of the left movements in universities in the early 60s because a lot of those people really did want a liberal education. In the early 60s, students would get very angry, but they would never step over the line to personal insult.

But then they got "values" and stopped thinking - the commitment to "values," is the end of thinking. Sure, you have to have political action. But moral indignation is the greatest danger to thought. Rage was the word. Nobody can think when they're enraged. They rationalize, but they don't reason. Differing with them becomes a crime.

Viewing society as indifferent, as did the students in the 60s, can lead in two different directions. Those who see society as indifferent can try to make that society attentive to study, or they can give society a set of different attachments without thinking about them.

The older generation in the universities fell into a kind of positivism by studying "facts" without "values". The 60s generation became attached to values without facts!

The 60s, moreover, were intellectually boring. The supposed intellectual explosion that came from caring just wasn't there. It became harder and harder to get students to discuss serious books. Paradoxically, they became much more American by becoming merely narrow. They conformed to the society they hated by losing the intellectual roots that could give them a critical distance from it.

But the professors, not the students, are the great disappointment of the 60s. It became clear that for them, academic freedom was just a pious expression. As soon as people started using a little force, like the students with guns at Cornell, not only did they give in, they admired the commitment of people breaking the law in the name of higher values.

NPQ: What about rock music? You dismiss rock n' roll as "junk food for the soul" which gives vent to the unmediated, barbarous expression of the "rawest passions" and against which there is no intellectual resistance. You say it may well be that a society's greatest madness appears as normal to itself, and that rock offers "nothing noble, sublime, profound, delicate, tasteful or decent. It is only intense, changing, crude and immediate" - confirming Tocqueville's fears about the baseness of democratic art.

Bloom: I've simply pointed out how terribly important rock music is to the lives of kids today.

I think the chapter on rock music is one of the best interpretations of the passages on music in Plato, which argues that music expresses the dark, chaotic forces of the soul and that the kind of music on which people are raised determines the balance of their souls.

The influence of rock music on kids today reasserts a central role of music that had fallen into disuse for almost a hundred years. Once we recognize this new centrality, however, we have to discuss which passions are aroused, how they are expressed, and the role this plays in the life of society. That kind of critique has never taken place.

NPQ: In general, you avoid blaming consumer capitalism as a major force in the "degradation" of culture, especially concerning rock n' roll. You also suggest that rock musicians release the dark forces in the soul without taming them through form and beauty as did Bach or Beethoven. Frank Zappa argues that the problem is not in the musicians, but in the middle-aged recording executives who are pandering to the base tastes of the public in order to boost sales.

Bloom: I do say that the spread of rock music is a result of the mixture of infantile taste and business exploitation of it. I didn't say for a moment that consumer society isn't a problem; it brings with it a huge amount of vulgarity. The nature of consumer society is to exploit the passions. But rock music is particularly crafted to suit its targets.

However, I'm not an economic determinist. A Marxist description is obviously very powerful, but it is a cheap criticism which avoids taking responsibility for one's own life. Parents, after all, can still influence kids' taste. They should not be deprived of the right to direct their children's education. The ubiquity of rock n' roll exposes the poverty of the home. There is a hidden message in rock that young people grasp immediately: they have inviolable rights to the expression of their uneducated sentiments. The electronic devices, the hi-fi and TV, are a common highway passing through all the houses in America, and there is no resistance to it. Privacy, which means the possibility of having a different life from what is most popular, disappears.

Even so, a free society makes it possible to philosophize and to engage in activities which are sublime, tasteful and decent. The people who are really hostile to Great Books are not the rich and the well off in this country. The hostile forces are the radical egalitarians who are worried about elitism and the feminists who worry about sexism in the classics.

NPQ: Let's look at feminism and the family. Don't you imply in your book that feminism is largely at fault for the high divorce rate because it encourages women to place their personhood above family duty?

Bloom: Not at all. I don't say feminism is the cause; I say radical individualism is the cause. I discuss the family from the point of view of the preparation of students for a liberal education.

So many kids today come from homes where the parents are divorced. The psychological effects of divorce affect the university atmosphere. There were times and places in history where the attachment to the ancestral was so great that there was no freedom for reason. Now, the situation is reversed. As a result of broken homes, there is such a quest for roots, for settling down and finding trust there is so much insecurity – that opening students' minds to free inquiry about the nature of things is barely possible. Free inquiry is too dangerous, too unsettling.

I argue that radical egalitarianism and cultural relativism encourage the separation of individuals. As a result, kids today have no really profound connections with the world and with one another. The nuclear family is an issue because it is the only restraint against our society's moving toward what I call "social solitaires."

I wrote about women in my book with considerable care. There is no suggestion on my part about turning back the clock in any way. But there should be no illusion that liberated choices have no price. There are damages.

Who naturally cares for a child? His parents. If the parents find that out of economic necessity they can't devote attention to child-rearing, others have to take their place. The fad of hysterical concern about child abuse is one aspect of the change. It comes out of the problem that so many children are taken care of by somebody else who doesn't have the motives of the parent. Parents feel guilty and frightened by their loss of supervision and therefore try desperately to make certain that those to whom they entrust their children will be reliable. But nothing can take the place of parents' motives.

NPQ: Do you think these parental problems are a matter of choice or economic necessity? It takes two wage-earners today to make ends meet.

Bloom: I think Americans have much more choice than they say. If they're fully conscious of the problem, men and women can make different kinds of arrangements.

The problem is deeper, though. One of the worst tendencies in America is that individuals place the highest priority on the right to "feel good about myself." That kind of "rights morality" easily becomes a cover for self-indulgence and neglect of one's duties.

NPQ: In discussing sexual liberation you seem to imply a natural order to the family that is valid across all time. You say that "Sex may be treated as a pleasure out of which men and women make what they will ... its importance or unimportance in life is decided freely by individuals. Or, sex can be immediately constitutive of a whole law of life, to which self-interest is subordinated and in which love, marriage and child-rearing of infants is the most important business. It cannot be both."

To take one example, doesn't the technology of the birth control pill change all that? Now pleasurable sex without procreation needn't undermine the family structure.

Bloom: The pill makes it easier not to have kids, but it increases the possibility of promiscuous sex. What are the psychological effects of that? Technology does not change nature. It makes promiscuous sex safer, but it does not provide a substitute for the attachment formed by sexual fidelity. Sex is made less sacred, and the singularly deep attachment to the family, bonded by sexual pleasure, is weakened. Part of today's unattachedness comes from easy, intimate contact which, strangely, makes it harder to have profound contact. This is as true for men as for women.

Rousseau, who in my view was the real founder of the idea of sublimation, argued that the effect of eroticism was to give us the possibility of idealism and attachment. Promiscuous sex undermines eroticism by replacing its mystery with immediate gratification.

And if sexual pleasure isn't mixed with enduring relationships - "this is the only person I want to do it with" - it becomes something like what herd animals do.

I've found it much harder to teach Plato's Symposium recently because in the Symposium you're asked to justify your erotic attachments, to say what they mean

about life. The beginning and the end of what most kids have to say about sex today is "I have the right to do what I want in the privacy of my own bedroom." Well, okay, but that doesn't take you very far. Just as our age is not a good one for nuns, it is also not very good for romantic kids. I am convinced that if you don't have the language for something you pretty much end up not having it any longer. This is what is happening with the multifarious phenomena of love.

NPQ: Some women criticize you as a "speculative anti-feminist" who has no idea of the concrete realities of women's lives today.

"Women just won't fit back into the girdle," as Betty Friedan says.

Bloom: ... whereas the natural thing would be to get them out of the girdle.

Look, I describe how the new equality of men and women affects life. This is only a description, and one I believe to be accurate. I also discuss contemporary feminism as ideology, and the threat it poses to liberal education. Such feminism is not necessary to the equalization or liberation of women, and this equality could have been, and probably was, achieved without it. To oppose radical deconstructionist feminism – a new school of thought aimed at deconstructing the literature of the past and showing that it is the cause of male dominance – is not to oppose equality in the work place. In the universities, at least, there is now a tendency to assert that he or she who opposes the former opposes the latter. This only obscures the issue.

Feminists have attacked me as saying that the liberation of women is not natural. That's not what I said in *The Closing of the American Mind*.

What I explicitly said was that America has two great traditions: love of nature and love of the conquest of nature. Feminism is especially related to the latter. It is very American in its love of the conquest of nature. The pill is an example of conquest over a nature which tied women to the family and dependence on males. What is difficult is to respect nature and at the same time have the passionate desire to conquer it.

So, I see the liberation of women as part and parcel of the American tradition. It's the specific ideology of contemporary feminism – of abstract equality and the notion

of a very specific female essence unrelated to the male essence that I find problematic.

NPQ: Why is the "feminist ideology" problematic for the university?

Bloom: The abstract ideology of feminism is one of the great threats to the university because its partisans argue that all literature antecedent to the feminist movement is sexist, from Plato to the Bible to Huck Finn. If all literature is sexist, then of course, it can't be taken seriously. Sexism has become the absolute evil.

You hear kids today saying, "Well, you know Aristotle had this weakness of not taking women into account" - already knowing it all and judging it unworthy before knowing anything! Aristotle's very definition of a barbarian is one who treats a woman like a slave. Nature is his standard, and it was the first standard which grounded equal treatment of women. I have yet to see a better one.

Every place you go these days, the symbol of evil is the "white Western male." Third Worldism and feminism are fused together in a dangerous unity that says "philosophy is only a Western male thing, irrelevant to our world." But, "white male Western philosophy," a demagogic insult, is the source of egalitarianism. Without it, there would be no conception of equality and the liberation of women.

The sexist argument is dangerous because it is being used as a bludgeon against thought. In a university you should be able to discuss all the possible relations and arrangements between men and women without being assaulted for not simply accepting what is heard over the loudspeaker. These days in the university, calling someone a sexist is worse than having called him a communist in the 1950s. You can't discuss the alternatives, the gains and the losses involved in our choices.

Even the charge of racism and cultural imperialism we heard in the past was not an attack on the classic texts themselves. It was about how we were not living up to the ideals of democracy. They didn't try to reformulate that whole tradition, as the feminists do.

Value Relativism, First Principles and Final Knowledge

NPQ: Your criticism of value relativism begs the question of what truths are not relative. Leo Strauss spoke about "universally valid final knowledge" and

"comprehensive insights." You yourself talk about "first principles" and "transcultural and transhistorical truths."

What are these truths?

Bloom: Perfect knowledge of the whole is not available to us. Determining what is good and bad depends on knowledge of the nature of being. Obviously our doubt about that is the impetus of the quest for knowledge. We may not know everything, or even know very much, but if we begin with the presupposition that "all is relative," we can't begin to investigate what our real alternatives are.

The original value relativism in Nietzsche, Heidegger or Weber at least had a seriousness in it. But today the ice cream peddler, your old dope dealer, your old Socrates are all put on the same plane. If it's all the same, how can you begin to decide? Max Weber had no difficulty in rejecting the vulgar alternatives. He said he couldn't choose among the high ones, Buddha, Jesus, Socrates, etc. We've lost even the elementary capacity to distinguish between high and low.

NPQ: How do we order values in a pluralistic society?

Bloom: With the dogmatic relativism of today's students, we can't even begin to enter into that philosophic exercise. My whole point is that they don't believe in the possibility of such a hierarchy of values. The whole problem with American relativism isn't the belief in nothing, it's the belief in anything. The American belief system today is like a monochrome kaleidoscope.

You can't be both relativistic and pro-choice, pro-democratic, pro-left and pro-civil rights. If you're a relativist, you can't believe in anything. That's what you have to face. You're a nihilist.

I am merely trying to point out the gravity of that choice. Nietzsche, one of the modern founders of cultural relativism, knew that choice. But this is an age of such utter relativism we don't even understand the choice.

As a result, it is much harder to talk about critical issues in universities today than it was one hundred years ago. It was hard to talk about God then, but you could do it carefully. Now you can do it because nobody cares. All anyone cares about is that

the suggestion that some truths might be found in the Great Books is a sexist and elitist proposition.

But, to return to your specific question, we would have to study whether pluralistic society is good - whether we "value" pluralism more than community.

NPQ: Is your proposition elitist? Aren't you suggesting an aristocracy of the truth?

Bloom: Anyone who wants access should have it. That's not the issue. The issue is to have something to teach in the first place. I don't really give a damn about how philosophy is going to be deliverable to 18 million young Americans. Everybody, including me, is interested in ending elitism. But most are doing it by no longer having anything to teach!

The university today can be compared to a huge church with lots of buildings, fundraisers and priests. When somebody raises the issue of whether "God is dead", the response is "what a theoretical question!"

NPQ: Again, what are these transcultural and transhistorical truths? Can you name them?

Bloom: I believe in their possibility. After all, no one talks seriously about white Western male natural science as opposed to Third World natural science. If gravity is transcultural why can't human rights, in principle, be transcultural?

In classical thought one can find some serious alternatives about the nature of human beings. There are some kinds of ridiculous things you can just refute, for example, that money is the highest end, or perhaps more pertinent to our current American practice, that health is.

And after you've found the easily refutable ones, which is what Socrates does, you're left with very few serious choices - the life of philosophers, of rulers, of prophets, of saints and of poets. Then the discussion really begins about the claims of each.

That doesn't mean that choosing between them is not difficult, but at that point, at least you've gone a long way down the road. Then you have to argue which one is the most plausible.

But we're always left with some doubt. That we are ignorant and need to know is our only absolute.

NPQ: Friedrich Schlegel said at the beginning of the last century that, "Humanity is struggling with all its power to find its center. It must pass away or be rejuvenated. Gray antiquity will become vital again and the most remote future culture will already announce itself in premonition."

Bloom: That's a post-Rousseau formulation. Schlegel expresses so much of what is characteristic, even in a vulgar way, of America – that it is not worth being a philosopher if you can't remake the whole society.

So much of philosophy after Rousseau fits with the modern longings about finding roots exemplified in Schlegel's quote. Since Rousseau, that's what philosophy has been called to do: to set up values, to find roots, to reconstruct society.

My sense of philosophy is almost the opposite. It's the older view that comes from the Greeks. It has to do with the liberation from the myths embedded in roots. It has to do with the liberation of the truth, with penetrating the shadows of ignorance and false knowledge on the walls of Plato's cave, with our simply seeing the world as it is.

The whole point of my book is that American culture has produced a false intellectualism where everyone thinks they are already liberated. But there is no cheap liberation. In its pseudo-openness, the American mind is becoming closed to the discovery of truth.